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# CAN 'HOUSE CHURCHES' BE SEEN AS 'AUTHENTIC MONUMENTS'? THE HERITAGE PROBLEM OF POST-WAR MODERN ROMAN- CATHOLIC CHURCH ARCHITECTURE IN BELGIUM

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**Abstract** – Within Belgian Roman-Catholic church architecture the 'house church' [huiskerk] constitutes an as yet unanswered problem of heritage conservation. First developed in the 1950's, the 'house church' became the favoured model after the Second Vatican Council, interpreting the place of worship as a domestic space. This case of modern architectural heritage is under threat without having been inscribed in the collective memory or subjected to scientific research. Its very lack of 'monumentality' seems to be a weakness. How can criteria be devised for monuments without monumentality? The answer may be found in the authenticity of these churches, which lies in the conscious representation of the Belgian Roman-Catholic climate of the fifties, a representation which implied breaking away from 'monumentality'. The authenticity assessment of the 'house churches' needs therefore to be closely tied with the investigation of the nature of monumentality.

**Index Terms** – Roman-Catholic Church Building, Modern Architecture, Authentic Monument, Belgium

## Introduction

The concept of the 'House church' first emerged in the 1950's as an answer to liturgical developments started at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Solutions were sought to allow a more active participation in the service which shed new light on the church plan. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) brought the 'house church' to the fore as the favoured model. Returning to the example of early Christianity this type of simple parish church interprets the place of worship as a domestic space (1). Two examples of the 'house church' stand out in Belgium. The first is the chapel of the student home *Pedagogie Pius X* in Heverlee (1952-1954), designed by the architects Paul Felix (1913-1981) and George Pepermans (1910), the furniture and stained glass windows in close collaboration with the sculptor Roger Bonduel (1930) and the glass artist Michel Martens (1921). This chapel was the waking call for Belgian post-war church art and architecture, and the further collaboration of these artists gave a lasting stimulus to Modernist church architecture in the country (2). The second, the church of Saint-Joseph the Artisan in Willembroek (1962-1964), is the work of architect Marc



Dessaunage (1931-1984). It made history as *the* realisation in Belgium which fused into a harmonious entity the two most vital strands of 20th-century western church architecture: the Chapel of the Illinois Institute of Technology (1952) by Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969), and the Chapel of Notre-Dame-du-Haut in Ronchamp (1953) by Le Corbusier (1887-1965) (3).

Both the chapel in Heverlee and the church in Willebroek are on the verge of disappearing notwithstanding repeated attempts to have them recognised as cultural heritage (4).

#### A Problem of Heritage

The case of the 'house church' poses an acute problem of cultural heritage conservation within the Belgian context. This part of Belgian cultural heritage finds itself under threat without yet having been the subject of systematic scientific research. The complexity already becomes clear from a succinct characterisation: the house church is a case of non-monumental, recent (post-war), Modernist, Roman-Catholic Western-European church architecture. Some of these aspects pose in themselves as yet unresolved questions of research and policy making.

The 'house church' makes a break with the concept of the 'triumphant church'. It is an intentionally non-monumental architecture, often inconspicuously situated in the surroundings, intended for a small community of believers. Its style is modern but without the rhetoric. Recent and consciously modest, house churches are not yet embedded in the public memory. When the small community attached to it dissolves, the house church is left defenceless. It is easily put to another use or even erased without public notice. So how to assess the value of monuments without monummentality, and how to devise discerning criteria for the question of their conservation? The authenticity assessment of the 'house churches' needs to be closely tied with the investigation of the nature of monummentality. In what follows we will make a first analysis of the problem, while at the same time touching on criteria that are indispensable to a justifiable conservation policy.

#### Modern Architecture and Monummentality

Modern architecture had a hard time claiming a right to monummentality. Before the last war almost no modernist monuments were built. The task of the designer of monuments had become more complicated. This was partly due to society becoming more democratic and pluralistic, partly to the transformations in the architectural vocabulary of the early modernists, which made them seem unfit to produce monuments (5).

Despite the negative authoritarian connotations that stigmatised monummentality by the end of the last war, Siegfried Giedion pleaded for the possibility of a modern meaningful monummentality. He noted that the last hundred years had failed to create lasting monuments (6). In this 'decline and misuse of monummentality' modern architecture had chosen to start from scratch and developed gradually from the smallest unit, onto urbanism, towards the *reconquest of the monummental expression*. In this vast scheme monuments were to be the most powerful accents. The avant-garde could lead the way, having already displayed the requisites for monummentality (7).

Figure 3: Design schemes for the church of Saint-Joseph the Artisan (photograph by Art d'Engise)

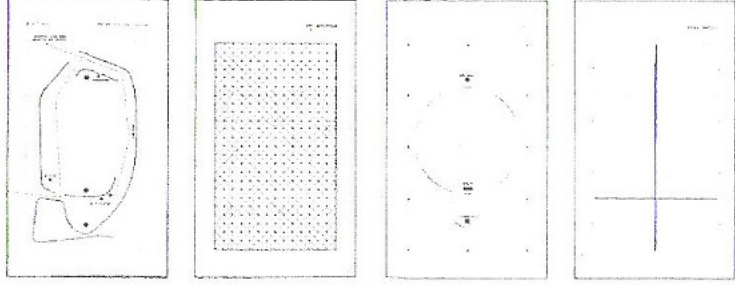


Figure 1: Student Home Plus-X, stained glass window by M. Matens (photograph by L. Herremann)

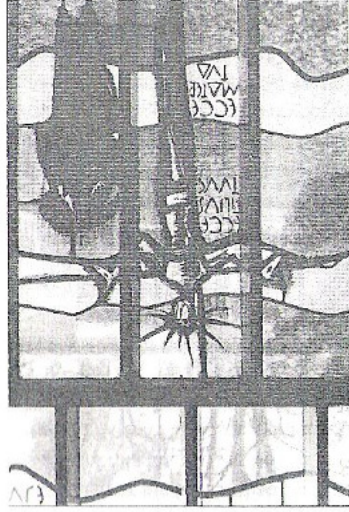
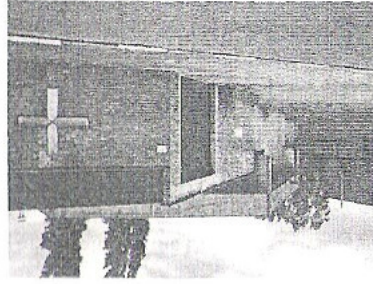


Figure 2: Church of Saint-Joseph the Artisan, present day situation





the private sphere, the paradigmatic quality related to the unique artistic achievement of the architect, the unintentional monument, the character of its memory-values and the relation with the present-day values, etc. are all essential questions to the problem.

#### The House Church in its Contemporary Socio-Cultural Context

In post-war Western Europe the attitude to monumentality was part of a complex reaction to the architecture of totalitarian regimes. This is reflected in theological studies on church architecture and the 'house church', the most important of which is Geert Bekker's untranslated essay *In een of ander huis. Kerkbouw op een keerpunt* [In some house or another. Church construction at a turning point]. This text is essential to understand the context in which the 'house church' came into being, and to assess the question of its authenticity.

The basic problem according to Bekker, was that the church building had adopted the model of an architecture that opposed modernity with an academic ideal. Bekker stresses first the informal origins of Christianity. Historically, the building of churches coincided with the evolution of Christianity into a dogmatic system. Formal Christian churches were therefore 'fake performances', separating clergy and congregation. The decline of religious connections cleared the way for pseudo-religious systems (including modernism), who contradict their democratic foundations.

Secularisation however does not exclude a religious way of life. On the contrary, a consistent Christian existence became possible with the emergence of a democratic world order. For the church building this meant that it must express not the Christian faith, but the community's religious experience of a secularised reality. Bekker relates the justification of the church building to the authenticity of the religious experience. Just as any building, a church can only be authentic, if it is at once symbol of and element in the dynamic totality of the human habitat.

The creative consciousness of existence cannot reside any more in a privileged object, but only in a design of the totality, in which programs are specifications of existence. When the church building takes position as the central ordering factor, it negates its real meaning and distorts the image of the community. This is why the church building should be conceived as 'some house or another'. Bekker uses these words from the Acts of the Apostles to describe what a contemporary church should be like. As the prototype of building, the house best fits the exemplary meaning of the church. On modern architecture Bekker remarks that it still behaved according to the traditional monumental-sacred pattern, turning every building into a cathedral. When the church building follows, it forsakes its role in modern architecture to break with sacred monumentality. Architecture should become the expression of the immanence of the human person, by becoming subservient to reality. This true meaning of

Ciedion exemplifies an approach to monumentality within modernist discourse, in which the great modern monuments easily find a place, but the 'house church' sits uneasily. In this respect it is important to distinguish monumentality from the monument. As the architectural historian William H. Curtis puts it: "Not all monuments are necessarily monumental, and many objects other than monuments may possess monumentality" (8). This point can be elaborated by leaving the sphere of the 'monumental civic monument'.

#### The private and the Unintentional Monument

In the first issue of the periodical *De Stijl* of 1917, J.J.P. Oud wrote that monumentality in modern architecture was of an 'internal nature', independent of material factors. In his view, the most important type of architecture would become the housing block, because it is its 'characteristic beauty' that determines the appearance of the modern street and the city. Therefore the most important task of the modern architect was to concentrate on this type (9). Oud thus pinpoints the private or domestic sphere as the source of monumentality in early modern architecture.

The link between private architecture and monumentality is not a recent one. Even in the title of the treatise on architecture *De re aedificatoria* of 1450 by Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472), the idea is present in the Latin stem of *aedes*, referring to both the family house and the home of gods. The 'memories' attached to a generations-old family house exert a positive influence on the moral fibre of the inhabitants (10). According to Alberti every edifice can become a monument (11). Considering private and public buildings on the same bases, Alberti writes: "Though it be true that private monuments require modesty and public ones Magnificence, yet public ones too are sometimes praised for being as modest as the others" (12).

An important notion related to monumentality is the 'paradigmatic concept', the capacity of a building to set an example, which in the view of Alberti was attainable only through personal artistic achievement and not through recognisable models.

In his essay of 1903, *The Modern Cult of Monuments: its Character and Origin*, Alois Riegl introduces the distinction between intentional and unintentional monuments. Relating to the conservation of monuments, Riegl distinguishes three forms of memory-values: the intentional commemorative value, the historical value and the age-value. While the two latter are unintentional memory-values, the difference is that the historical value connects the monument to a certain 'original state' in the past, while the age-value refers to the capacity of the monument to reveal its transformation through history. It is clear that these values suggest different and sometimes contradictory strategies of conservation. According to Riegl, age-value would guide the conservation of the monument in the future (13).

The concepts outlined touch directly upon the heritage problem of the 'house church'. The complex relation between modernism and monumentality, the monumentality of



"functionality" is attained when modern architecture stops building false monuments (14).

"The monumental conception of an architecture that does not exist for human beings, but for an abstraction, finds its prototype in the church building; the church building has maintained the privilege of such representational architecture. This is, on the one hand, normal, because the church building (or its equivalent) is the natural resume of an externally hierarchised, closed community; on the other hand, it is not justified, because there is no more room for such representations of abstractions (whether they be called God, Nation, Money or Entertainment) in a democratic conception of humanity and certainly not in the evangelic conception of the church [...]. In a democratic society there is only room for an internalised, personal religion and church, not any longer for a public social institute" (15).

## Conclusion

Curtis proposes that, to understand the monumentality of modern architecture, "authentically should be the focus, as it implies the search for probity and for a lasting symbolic interpretation of the social sphere. Authentic monumentality is impossible without reflecting on the meaning of human relationships and the significance of institutions. [...] The monument should seek to transcend mere image making. [...] The good monument does not bully but is not neutral either. Through its poetic intensity it opens up new realms of mental experience [...] The authentic monument reveals the profound bond of form and content" (16). Curtis' reflections on the authentic monument seem to relate to Bekaert's justification of the 'house church' without much friction. Nonetheless, the 'house church' is an intentional non-monument. It becomes heritage only in spite of itself. Deeply rooted in the socio-cultural and theological post-war climate in Belgium, the authenticity of this heritage lies in its breaking with the monumental-sacred tradition on which rests the modern cult of monuments.

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

- 1) For the typology of the 'house church' see G. Bekaert, 1967 and the articles which Frédéric Debuyss published from 1964 on in the periodical *Art d'Eglise*. A recent work is *Communio-Räume. Auf der Suche nach der angemessenen Raumgestalt katholischer Liturgie*, Gethards, Albert, Sternberg, Thomas and Zahner, Walter (eds), Regensburg, 2003.
- 2) P. Janssens, 1955: 253-256; G. Bekaert, 1956: 251-253; Idem, 1961: 131-132, 143; G. Bekaert en R. De Meyer, 1981: 46-48; G. Bekaert, 1995: 68; Zs. Börcz, 1999: 20, 26-27.
- 3) L. Verpoest, 1987: 22.

- 4) See also my article "Zorg om het Vlaamse kerkpatrimonium van na de Tweede Wereldoorlog", to be published in *Archives et Bibliothèques de Belgique*, Spring-Summer, (2006)
- 5) W. J.R. Curtis, 1984: 66
- 6) S. Giedion, F. Leger, J.L. Sert, 1943: 62-63.
- 7) S. Giedion, 1944: 54, 57.
- 8) S. Giedion, 1944: 65.
- 9) J.P. Oud, 1917: 10-11.
- 10) L.B. Albert, "The Preface", in 1986; F. Choay, 1984: 100.
- 11) For these points we use some ideas from F. Choay, 1984.
- 12) L.B. Albert, 1986: 24.
- 13) A. Riegl, 1903.
- 14) G. Bekaert, 1967: 7-30.
- 15) G. Bekaert, 1967: 11.
- 16) W. J.R. Curtis, 1984: 66, 84-85.

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# CONSERVATION DES MONUMENTS HISTORIQUES AU BRÉSIL:

LE PROBLEME DES CRITERES

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Abstract - This paper is about theoretical aspects of preservation in Brazil. The historical transformation undergone by the field in the country is analyzed. Conservation becomes effective with the federal law of 1937. During the three decades that followed, known as the "heroic phase", interventions aimed at a complete state, removing later transformations and bringing the monument back to its first form. After a critical reevaluation of this phase, there was a convergence to the theoretical principles contained in the Venice Charter. Nevertheless, the existing legislation is laconic as far as conservation principles are concerned, and this is one of the causes of the discrepancies that can be seen in recent interventions. In this paper, the author seeks to place emphasis on the relevance of theoretical principles in order to face problems in their full intricacy, and as an efficient means of preserving material, historic, formal and symbolic values of monuments.

*Index Terms - Conservation in Brazil, Restoration Theory*

## Introduction

Au moment de sa consolidation, la préservation des monuments historiques au Brésil a eu une connotation culturelle allée à une volonté politique d'affirmation de l'identité nationale. Dans le scénario intellectuel et artistique, plusieurs courants innovateurs - qui se sont manifestés depuis le début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle et qui sont devenus plus vigoureux dès les années 1920 - ont cherché à affirmer l'identité nationale à travers les racines d'un passé artistique jusqu'alors peu connu et peu valorisé. C'était aussi une façon de s'opposer aux traces de l'éclectisme et de ce que l'on considérait comme une excessive européisation de la culture brésilienne, associée à la Première

République (1889-1930). La construction de l'identité nationale a été poursuivie à travers plusieurs politiques conduites par l'Etat Nouveau (1937-1945). Le Ministère de l'éducation et de la santé, dirigé par Gustavo Capanema, a développé beaucoup d'actions en ce sens et une de ces actions était la préservation du patrimoine historique. Basé sur un avant-projet de loi conçu par l'écrivain Mario de Andrade, Rodrigo Andrade a rédigé un nouveau projet de loi fédérale, en proposant la création du Service du Patrimoine Historique et Artistique National (SPHAN), dirigé par Rodrigo Andrade lui-même. L'instrument

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